



## VIEWPOINT

# The road investment strategy is a victory for 'predict and provide' over transport planning

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During 2014 I had the great privilege of being seconded to the New Zealand Ministry of Transport to lead a major project called 'Future Demand' as part of its strategic policy programme. Our focal question was 'how could or should our transport system evolve in order to support mobility in the future?'. We employed scenario planning to develop four plausible and divergent futures for transport and society in NZ for the year 2042. These were based on two critical uncertainties. The first concerned what society would want to do in the future, and specifically how it would want to connect ranging from physically (transport system) to virtually (telecommunications). The second concerned what society would be able to afford to do in the future, and specifically what the relative cost of energy would be, ranging from high to low. (Little did we know that world oil prices were about to unexpectedly slump – underlining the validity of our approach to uncertainty.)

Like the UK, NZ has been experiencing a reducing traffic intensity of economic output as well as having seen little growth in car use over the last ten years. Concurrent with these trends (and peculiar to some), the NZ Government has a programme of investment in transport infrastructure, and road capacity in particular, that is above the OECD average in terms of % GDP – with a focus on enabling economic growth. What was therefore inspiring about the Ministry's strategic policy programme was its intention and willingness to reach

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beyond present-day policy in order to exhibit national thought leadership and provoke debate concerning how to address future policy and investment decisions to assure a thriving NZ in the face of uncertainty. This will continue during 2015. It has exposed challenging insights for the transport sector and other sectors to consider. We have estimated across the four scenarios developed that change from 2014 to 2042 in total private vehicle kilometres travelled could range from an increase of 35% to a decline of 53%.

Three important principles emerged from consideration of the focal question in the context of significant uncertainty. The following text is taken from the Future Demand final report: "Firstly, it is access not mobility *per se* that is key to a thriving New Zealand. There are uncertainties over what make-up of access will be desirable and affordable in future. Therefore secondly we must ensure a resilient provision of access options that provides for adaptability of behaviour over time. This means a combined and coordinated effort to evolve and improve roading and proximity and digital communications. Our transport system's nature and scale partly determine the demand placed on it. Therefore, thirdly, when evolving our transport system we should have in mind providing for the demand we believe is appropriate (and feasible) rather than providing for the demand we may be tempted to predict."

These principles emanate from now well-established transport planning insights in the UK. I was therefore, to say the least, perplexed when three days after the launch of the NZ work ([www.transport.govt.nz](http://www.transport.govt.nz)) the UK Government launched its Road Investment Strategy (RIS). My first sense on reading it was that I had been catapulted back in time to 1989 and *Roads for Prosperity* – a point in history which for the following quarter of a century we have looked back on as the end of 'predict and provide'. 1989 was also when the world wide web was invented yet the RIS, in looking at drivers of future road demand, plays down substantially the uncertain role of digital connectivity, unlike the approach taken in NZ. After a second reading, I am still struggling to work out whether the RIS represents evidence-based policy or policy-based evidence. It

certainly appears to acknowledge uncertainty but I cannot help but feel sceptical about yet another set of official road traffic forecasts all of which show substantial projected growth.

An important lesson from the NZ work was the need to get the right balance of investment in access between road capacity, urban development and digital connectivity in the face of uncertainty and to have a coordinated approach to developing this 'triple-access' system.

There are some signs across the UK Government's 'Building Britain' initiative (of which the RIS is a part) that it is investing in such a triple-access system, for instance in terms of its investment to expand the availability of superfast broadband connectivity. However, my concern is the absence of a coherent policy framework that addresses the triple-access system and provides a basis for a coordinated approach. The reminder from NZ has been to make a distinction between 'predict and provide' and 'decide and provide'. The latter acknowledges that our transport system's evolution shapes society and that we need to be more mindful of this – if we are to avoid the unintended consequences of the former.

I would like to think the current UK approach is one of deciding its future rather than trying to predict it but I have my doubts. We are of course under pressure from short-term imperatives relating to economic revival. In such times it can be hard to adhere to transport planning principles. Nearly two years ago, 32 UK transport professors wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport seeking to articulate these principles and urging him to work with them and the professional institutions "in establishing a clear long-term national policy framework". They never received a reply. I hope that the willingness to embrace difficult thinking being shown by our colleagues on the other side of the world will soon be ignited once again here in the UK. **LTT**

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Glenn Lyons is professor of transport and society at UWE Bristol and until the end of January 2015 is also strategy director at the New Zealand Ministry of Transport.

## In Passing

**LTT** 'Twas the season to be jolly; except, it seems, at the DfT. A Freedom of Information request has been made to find out how much the Department has spent on Christmas decorations, cards and parties in the last three years. Remarkably little is the answer. The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency is the most profligate part of the department, spending £100 on a real tree in 2013, and budgeting to spend £90 on an artificial tree and £30 for a real tree this Christmas. The Highways Agency spent £15 on a real tree in 2012 but hasn't bought a bauble since. And what about DfT HQ? "The central department and other executive agencies have not incurred any expenditure on Christmas decorations," we're told. "Additionally, the Department as a whole has not incurred any expenditure on Christmas cards or parties."

**LTT** As Sir Howard Davies ponders the thorny question of which airport to expand, Heathrow or Gatwick, he can only look enviously to China where residents of the village of Xin Jia An, near Beijing, are apparently celebrating the

news that their village is to be flattened to make way for a new £9bn seven-runway airport. "Homes that have stood through a century of upheaval will vanish overnight. And the villagers could not be more delighted," reports *The Times*. One resident told the paper: "I am happy. It means that I can move into an apartment."

**LTT** Congratulations to the 143 organisations who performed heroics by finding time to respond to the DfT's 11-day consultation in November on how £6bn of road maintenance funding should be allocated to councils over the next six years. The rushed process seems to have tripped up the DfT because its conclusions on the consultation and its announcement of the way forward say different things, even though they were released on the same day! In its conclusions to the consultation the Department says that, because of adverse reaction to the plan to award some of the cash via a challenge fund, "the overall challenge fund will be reduced [from £600m] to £500m over the six-year period." Yet the challenge fund guidance says

the fund will be worth £575m. Meanwhile, the Department says in its conclusions on the consultation that it will "consider further" whether to include the major maintenance or renewal of footways or cycleways within any challenge fund. The deliberating can't have taken long because the challenge fund guidance says eligible projects will indeed include "major maintenance or renewal of footways or cycleways".

**LTT** With the General Election now less than five months away all of the major political parties have started to prepare their assaults on the enemy. But the Tories' first salvo has, it would appear, misfired rather badly. Because, according to *The Daily Mail*, a paper that is not generally known for ridiculing the Conservative Party, the first election poster produced by the Tories features the wrong road. "Let's stay on the road to a stronger economy," the caption beneath a picture of, well, a road, says. But the road in question just so happens to be in Germany. Oops.